Service Learning in an Urban Aboriginal Community: "Real Aborigines Don't Just Live in the Bush"

Michelle Johnston, Dawn Bennett, Bonita Mason, and Chris Thomson

Abstract Service learning is gaining greater recognition in Australian universities as a powerful and effective means by which students can learn about Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Working in and with communities provides opportunities for students to form personal relationships with Aboriginal peoples that can have long-term benefits for all participants. One of the first steps in establishing a service-learning program will inevitably be to decide on a location. Is a service-learning program located in a remote Aboriginal community of more benefit to students than one located in an urban community? This chapter describes a service-learning program that was established for media students in collaboration with Aboriginal community groups in Perth, Western Australia. It discusses why an urban community was the answer to our question of where and how an urban service-learning program might build strong and lasting community relationships and provide a transformative learning experience for students.

Keywords Service learning • Western Australia • Screen arts • Journalism • Nyungar • Noongar • Film and television • Media • Urban • Action research

1 Local Introduction

As Australian universities endeavor to embed Indigenous perspectives and culture into undergraduate coursework, service learning has emerged as a powerful and effective means by which to meet this objective. In service-learning contexts, theory and practice combine to provide students with opportunities to learn about Indigenous people, culture and history by taking them out of the classroom and into communities. For educators looking to establish a service-learning program within their own institution, there is a great deal of work and planning to be done, and much of this planning begins with the question of location. Should the program run in collaboration with an urban community, or are there greater benefits for students who have a remote or regional community experience? As Glenn Woods has discussed in chapter "Learning in Community: Reflections on Seventeen Years of Visiting Kuntri" of this book, influencing this decision is the cultural positionality and, moreover, community relationships of each founding educator. In our case, we define our positionality as follows.

Michelle Johnston is a non-Indigenous Australian, or a 'wadjella' to use the Noongar word. She was born, and has lived her whole life, in Whadjuk country—Perth. Over the 7 years of her doctoral research, which centered on the production of the television program *Noongar Dandjoo* for National Indigenous Television (NITV), she established a relationship with the Perth Aboriginal community. She

now recognizes this relationship as the most fulfilling and enjoyable aspect of her work. Michelle has produced four series of *Noongar Dandjoo*, guided by an action research philosophy and a focus on building relationships and respect. This was the background to her participation in establishing a service-learning program at Curtin University.

Bonita Mason learned a hard and shocking lesson about racism when confronted with South African apartheid when 8 years old, en route to Australia as the daughter of English immigrants. This lesson broadened and deepened in Western Australia through the treatment of local Aboriginal people, and was made more personal by the experience of her Injibarndi-Wongai foster sister. She learned more about structural and institutional racism through her work for the WA Government and as a journalist reporting on deaths in custody and working for Aboriginal land rights and other organizations in the Kimberley. Now, as a journalism academic, she is committed to contributing to the pool of competent and confident Indigenous affairs journalists, to improve the media coverage of Indigenous peoples and concerns, and increase the range of Indigenous voices heard through our media.

Raised in a family that had inhabited Australia for several generations, Chris Thomson never thought of himself as anything other than Australian. Of course, when one considers himself "Australian" the aptness of that assessment must be weighed against the 40,000-year-plus connection to the continent that is the sole experience of the first Australians. Chris was not formally introduced to Aboriginal culture until attending the University of Queensland, where he read *Tom Petrie's reminiscences of early Queensland* (1904/1980) and was impressed by the relative empathy for Brisbane's Murri people in that early colonial text. In the same year, he undertook an Australian studies unit in which a young Kev Carmody, with acoustic guitar, delivered a lecture. A partial lyric from a song that Carmody had not yet completed, delivered with a grin—"Despite the whites and taipan bites …"—made a big impression. Now, as a journalist and journalism academic in Perth, Chris sometimes has the privilege of working with and interviewing members of South-Western Australia's Noongar nation.

Dawn Bennett was born and raised in England in a highly multicultural environment. Moving to Australia as a young adult she looked, as a new migrant, on a society that often seemed to prejudice migrants who shunned the power and privilege of Whiteness, in much the same way as it discriminated against established citizens. She realized, with some embarrassment, that unlike many migrants from different cultural backgrounds, she was readily accepted as a 'Pom' and an Australian. Only later did she learn that prejudice extended to Australia's First Peoples. This realization led to a commitment to her development and learning and, as a result, to enhancing the awareness and understanding of higher education students. Her hope is that ignorance and prejudice can be changed through the actions of many.

Working with a remote or regional community is usually described as an "immersion" experience and may be considered a more ideal choice for some service-learning programs, but we found that an urban community has its own unique and valuable experiences to offer students. This chapter discusses an urban service-learning program at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia.

The traditional custodians of South-Western Australia are the Noongar Aboriginal people. Noongar country extends from north of the town of Jurien Bay, 220 km north of Perth on Western Australia's west coast, to east of Hopetoun on WA's south

coast, and is home to 14 distinct Noongar groups. Members of one of those groups, the Whadjuk Noongar people, are the traditional custodians of metropolitan Perth (Thomson, Bennett, Johnston, & Mason, in press).

In 2011, an estimated 88,270 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013). This equated to 13.2 % of Australia's total Indigenous population, the third largest Indigenous population of Australia's states and territories. In 2013, 39.2 % (34,600 people) of the state's Indigenous people lived in the Western Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs' Metro Region, which comprises metropolitan Perth and 20 surrounding local government areas that lie mainly in Noongar country (Department of Aboriginal Affairs [DAA], 2013). This offered opportunities for students to work with Aboriginal people in the Perth community.

In 2012, we commenced planning for a service-learning program that would offer the opportunity for media students to develop cultural competency by working with an Aboriginal community. The service-learning program, which we called Aboriginal Community Engagement or 'ACE' has run twice to date, with a mixed cohort of third year Screen Arts and Journalism students. In the first year, students produced two videos. One, called 'Beat It, Live Longer', was produced in partnership with Langford Aboriginal Association and featured a community health program. The second was a short documentary produced alongside Noongar Radio that showed how the radio station contributed to community culture and identity. In the second year of the program (2014), the students worked with Langford again, in partnership with Relationships Australia, to produce a video about their community grief and loss program. Noongar Radio also participated for a second time, focusingon the production of an informational video about long-running negotiations between Noongar people and the Western Australian government to resolve a native title claim over metropolitan Perth and the state's Southwest. Over the 2 years that the program has run, Journalism students have also worked with several other com- munity partners to produce feature articles for the Curtin InkWire website.[1]

As we commenced planning, the question of where to run our service-learning program was one of the first to be considered. As premised above, having discussed a number of options that would take our students to regional and remote Western Australia we made the decision to run the program in Perth, in Whadjuk Noongar country, with local, urban Aboriginal community groups. Relationships already established between the Perth Aboriginal community and Michelle and Bonita were significant elements in making that choice; however, we were also guided by other factors. What follows is a discussion of these factors, and the advantages and disadvantages of choosing to work with an urban Aboriginal community.

Because our students are final year Journalism and Screen Arts students, the representation of Aboriginal people by the media is a recurring theme throughout this chapter. One of the primary aims of our service-learning program is to produce competent and culturally aware journalists and program makers who will improve media representation of Aboriginal people in the future.

2 "Real Aborigines Live in the Bush"

The majority of students who participated in the first Curtin service-learning program in 2013 were young, non-Indigenous Journalism and Screen Arts students who had spent most of their lives in Perth or other large urban centres. They are identified here using pseudonyms. With the exception of two students, all had little or no first-hand experience of Aboriginal peoples or cultures; much of what they knew, they had learned from the media. The representation of Aboriginal people by the media, especially news media, often reinforces stereotypes by representing Aboriginal people as 'other' and focusing on negative issues or conflicts (see Hartley & McKee, 1996; Kerr & Cox, 2013; Mickler, 1998). Gail Phillips includes Indigenous peoples in her analysis of the media portrayal of ethnic minorities, which found, as have studies of local media in other parts of the world, that the Australian news media predominantly portray ethnic minorities "as somehow threatening to an assumed Anglo mainstream" (2009, p. 424). This negative and stereotypical representation of Aboriginal people influences wider community per- ceptions of Aboriginal people and culture, and contributes to the notion held by many non-Indigenous Australians that real Aborigines live in the bush, and that Aboriginal people who live in urban areas have lost their culture.

One of the most significant examples of this attitude is a series of articles written by media commentator Andrew Bolt (2009) for the Herald and Weekly Times. Bolt named several high-profile, fair-skinned Aboriginal people whom he declared were exploiting Indigenous-funding opportunities by identifying as Aboriginal. He wrote:

> Hear that scuffling at the trough? That's the sound of black people being elbowed out by white people shouting "but I'm Aboriginal, too". (Bolt, 2009)

The Aboriginal people named in the article sued Bolt and the Herald and Weekly Times for racial discrimination. In 2011, the Federal Court ruled against Bolt and ordered the Herald and Weekly times to publish a corrective notice with the reasons for the court's judgment. The Bolt case is not cited here as a way to deny problematic identity issues for the Aboriginal community (see Oxenham et al., 1999), but rather as an example of how such media commentary can reinforce the stereotype of who and what is Aboriginal. There is a populist-romantic view that associates Indigenous with the primitive and "the idea of 'Indigenous' [as] irreconcilable with modernity" (Meadows & Molnar, 2001, p. 602). As Noongar author Kim Scott writes (Scott & Brown, 2005, p. 90): "Most thought that there was only "oppression culture" left in Noongar country—not "high" culture, not creation stories, language and songs" (p. 90). Noongar Elder and academic Associate Professor Ted Wilkes explains further:

> White people who live in Perth don't believe that Aboriginal people living south of the 26th parallel are genuine and real Aboriginal people. They say, "they're not real blackfellas". We are Noongar. We are the genuine Noongars. We are the modern contemporary Noongar people. And for any whitefella to say that we're not is a misnomer. It's an absolute lie. It's a mistruth. And it's a stretching of the truth again to meet their own selfish and ethnocentric views. (personal communication, February 2007)

The Curtin service-learning program required media students to spend a semester working with a Perth Aboriginal community group. They would work with community partners, on a project to be determined by their partners. During the course of each collaborative project they were fortunate to work alongside many strong and inspirational Aboriginal community members and leaders, and participate in com-

munity events. They also witnessed the important role that culture plays in the lives of contemporary, urban Aboriginal people and came to understand that culture is not static, but a constantly evolving and changing thing that is influenced by the political, natural and economic environments. In particular, the students witnessed the importance of land and country to Aboriginal people and how country is central to Aboriginal culture and identity:

> I didn't realize their close connection to country. (Sophie, 2013)
>
> I had no idea about just the connection to land. (Emily, 2013)
>
> Every place has a history but I never really thought much about it 'til now. Pinjarra's massacre is secret history and it makes me think about what other secret histories may exist. (Jack, 2014)

The connection that Aboriginal people have with the land—their country—is complex, and has never been more of an issue for the Noongar nation than it is now. Noongar Elder Sealin Garlett speaks about high emotion and the tears shed by the Aboriginal people who were present when the Noongar Recognition Bill was introduced into the State Parliament:

> It was the tears of a family that has come to light the freedom of the Noongar spirit within an old, old land that belonged to them. [This recognition in parliament] has been a time when the pulse-beat of our nation—of the Noongar nation—and the recognition of the spirit of the people that belong to this land, has been able to be elevated to a quality and a place that they can call their home … this allows my spirit to know that this is where I belong. (Garlett, 2014)

In 2015, the Noongar people will decide whether or not to accept a first and "final offer" (Barnett & Mischin, 2013) by the Western Australian Government to settle a 2003 native title claim over all Noongar land. The offer, which state Premier Colin Barnett says is worth $1.3 billion and follows "exhaustive negotiations" (Barnett, 2014), came in the wake of the 2006 interim decision by Federal Court judge Murray Wilcox to recognize native title for undetermined parts of the land and waters within Perth, a first for any capital city in Australia. Justice Wilcox's decision was appealed by the State Government, and the appeal was upheld by the Full Bench of the Federal Court. The court ruled that Justice Wilcox had failed to consider whether there had been continuous acknowledgment and observance of traditional laws and customs by the claimants (Banks, 2008; Bodney v Bennell, 2008; see also Host, Owen, & South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, 2009). The question of native title in Perth was left open for further consideration and, in 2009, state Cabinet decided the government would abandon its legal challenge and instead negotiate directly with the Noongar people (Thomson, 2009). The resulting offer has divided the Noongar nation, and it is this conflict and division that the media has represented to the wider community. While the media focus on conflict (see Kerr & Cox, 2013), the complexities of Aboriginal connection to country, for the most part, are ignored and so the media fail to make a positive contribution to the debate.

A group of three journalism students from our 2014 service-learning group, working in collaboration with Noongar radio, produced a video that would help explain the native title settlement offer to the Noongar community, to assist them in making an informed decision when it was time to vote. In producing the video the students listened to the diverse arguments for and against the offer and were able to better understand the complex cultural and social justice issues that underpin the

native title debate. One of these journalism students was reminded of the Jack Davis play 'No Sugar' that she had read in high school, and how that Noongar story had helped her put herself,

> in the shoes of the Noongar people of that time. Re-reading the play four years on, with the knowledge and stories I have acquired through this unit, has furthered my understanding of the themes of suppression, injustice and the importance of land and culture to the Noongar people. (Carole, 2014)

On the one hand students are learning about Aboriginal culture, usually for the first time, and understanding the differences between their own culture and Noongar culture. On the other hand, some students commented on how much they and their Aboriginal community partners had in common:

> We just worked locally and I felt there wasn't that much of a cultural difference—that, I thought, was pretty good. (Adrian, 2013)

The Perth Aboriginal community has been living in a predominantly white culture since colonization in 1829. Most will say that they have learnt to walk in two cultures and this kind of adaptation has been necessary for their survival. Our students have benefited from the ease with which Perth Aboriginal people relate to the non-Indigenous community as they built their own relationships with Aboriginal community partners—a requirement of our service learning program. Rather than students participating in a program of cultural activities under the close supervision of teaching staff and Aboriginal educators, they went out into community alone with instructions to take time to listen, learn and to be led by their community partners.

Though the classroom offered opportunities for cultural awareness training, discussions of their experiences, and a structure for their participation in the program, there were, nonetheless, anxieties about offending or saying and/or doing the wrong thing. Noongar Elder Dean Collard helped to ease those anxieties:

> The students are pretty safe working in Perth. There is a space where it becomes human, rather than cultural … people connect up by communicating their values … and as long as people, when they connect up, demonstrate those human values about respect and empathy, people are quite safe. (personal communication, 2014)

3 Our Community

The development of students' sense of citizenship and their understanding of social justice issues are frequently cited as important objectives for a successful, or strong, service learning program (see Sheffield, 2011). Students who participate in a service learning experience have the opportunity to better understand their place within a community and their responsibilities as citizens (Kerins, 2010, p. 650). With that in mind, the fact that Curtin University is located in Perth and in Whadjuk Noongar country was a significant factor in considering a place to run a service-learning program. It seemed appropriate to prioritize our own community as we looked for potential partners. Why travel to another remote or regional community when there was the opportunity to develop a relationship with an Aboriginal community in the place where we all lived? Curtin University proudly promotes itself as the first Australian university to adopt a Reconciliation Action Plan, as the university states

on its website:

> Our plan aims to turn good intentions into action by creating and implementing a strategic plan to help address the many shortcomings that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. (Curtin University, 2014, p. 648)

It was our belief that Curtin and our service-learning program had an obligation to prioritize and work with the Perth Aboriginal community, and that this would be consistent with the university's reconciliation plan. When seeking feedback from community partners on completion of our 2013 service-learning program, Noongar Radio Station Manager Wayne Bynder expressed his support for the program, and a degree of surprise that the university had, figuratively speaking, "come down from its position high on the hill" to ask that we work together (personal communication, 2013). When giving feedback on the program many of our community partners expressed surprise and delight that the university had approached them and expressed a desire to work with community. Significantly, the service-learning program has contributed to a change in community perceptions about the university.

In addition to the university's obligation to community, Michelle believed that she had a personal obligation because of her own long-running relationship with the Perth Aboriginal community. She was aware of the time it had taken to establish that relationship—eight years—as well as the benefits and personal enjoyment experienced as a result of that long-term relationship. Time, and lots of it, to be with people was the key and she wanted to offer our students the possibility of having a similarly rewarding experience. After years of producing the television program *Noongar Dandjoo* she was pleased to hear these words from a community Elder, after requesting his feedback on the program:

> It tracks a path for reconciliation. It connects up to bigger issues than just a film production and it's defining ways that we might collaborate and work together, which is what Australia needs to do if it wants to find its soul. The Aboriginal question is an important one. This little journey that you take just represents the bigger picture of how they should be doing it. (Dean Collard, personal communication, 2012)

A service-learning program outside of Perth would offer only limited time with community, and was less likely to develop into a long-term relationship for the students.

Taking the time for a long-term commitment to a community is often recognized as an important protocol, especially when working with remote communities. Yet spending an appropriate amount of time is not clearly stated as a priority in recognized, published protocols, such as Lester Bostock's guidelines for the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), *The Greater Perspective* (1997), or the *National Health and Medical Research Council* (NHMRC) *guidelines for the ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (2003). These respected guidelines emphasize the importance of building relationships but do not specifically mention the need to spend time. It would be difficult for these publications to define how much time is enough time. A story from *The Australian* newspaper highlights the need for researchers to take the time to have a conversation with Aboriginal people. It writes of a woman from a Gulf of Carpentaria community:

> For Gloria Friday and her daughter Adrianne, the endless stream of do-gooders passing through their remote town does little to help. All come with ideas, but few listen to those of the locals—at least that's how they feel. (Aikman, 2012, p. 363)

The need to take time and to develop long-term relationships with Aboriginal peoples is frequently emphasized by those experienced in the field. Journalist, Tony Koch, has been visiting, taking holidays in, and reporting on the same Aboriginal communities in the Queensland gulf country for many years. He says that process has been hard work because "people are sick of journalists coming and writing horrible things about them" (Waller, 2010, p. 433). Locals call those types of journalists "seagulls" because they "fly in, shit on them and leave" (Waller, p. 433).

We do not intend to suggest that service-learning programs that partner with remote communities are 'seagulls'. However, programs such as Griffith University's Arts-Based Service Learning program (see chapter "Exploring University-Community Partnerships in Arts-Based Service Learning with Australian First Peoples and Arts Organizations" of this book), which has been working with the Tennant Creek community for six years, are successful because university educators have established a long-term relationship with that community. While acknowledging that some students do return to remote communities, it is also fair to say that it is difficult for participating students to maintain a relationship with such a community when vast distances separate them. While it is too early for evidence to demonstrate that students are more likely to maintain a relationship with an urban community than they are with a remote one, we suggest that the practicalities of returning to an urban community make it more likely.

4 A New Sense of Place

We begin with Australian author and historian Bill Gammage (2014, p. 47), who discusses the differences in the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people see land:

> As a migrant and multi-cultural society, "place" and "home" are not necessarily the same thing for many non-Aboriginal Australians. "Country" equates with "nation" and non-Indigenous Australians are split from the land. For Aboriginal peoples "country" is communal and spiritual, landscape of the mind. "Country", "place", and "land" are not words about nature but, rather, words about culture.

During our first experience of running a service-learning program in Whadjuk-Noongar country we noticed that students were seeing "their" environment with new eyes. The meaning of words like "country" and "place" changed for them. They listened to Aboriginal stories about country and spirituality and started to see familiar places and features of the landscape in a different way. They learned that landmark Perth locations have Noongar names. For example, Kings Park or Mt Eliza, which is a well-known tourist destination that overlooks the Perth CBD, is called Kaarta Gar-up, which comes from the word "kaart", the Noongar word for head or hill.

> [D]ay after day, week after week, I witnessed to a magical effect (sic) that the Aboriginal people had on me. I started looking at the landscape with different eyes. I began to build more knowledge about the topic in particular but also about Noongar culture in general! (Dario, 2014)

Another student expressed outrage because he hadn't learnt about the cultural significance of the land before:

> For me it's upsetting. Why has this information been withheld from my education? Why has

> this knowledge about the land and the seasons and all these different places—why has that been withheld from my education? (Bronte, 2014)

Evidence of this changing perspective became most apparent when Noongar Elder and Curtin University academic and Elder in Residence, Associate Professor Simon Forrest, led a field trip to a town called Pinjarra, which is a one-hour drive south of Perth. We visited the site of the "Pinjarra Massacre", also known as the "Battle of Pinjarra", depending on which historical perspective the storyteller subscribes to. The field trip tells the story of the 1834 punitive expedition by Governor James Stirling and a party of his men who attacked and killed a number of Binjarab Noongar men, women and children.

Fig. 1 The 'Old Mill' in South Perth where the Pinjarra tour commences (2014 field trip)

The trip commenced in the suburb of South Perth at the 'Old Mill' (Fig. 1), a well-known Perth landmark that was built in 1835 and that overlooks the city and the Swan River. The journey followed the route taken by the punitive expedition as it takes the students through familiar Perth suburbs and landmarks and asks them to imagine these places at a different time (Fig. 2). A recorded soundscape with narration and music is replayed as the students imagine the events leading up to the massacre, and at the massacre site itself. A student commented on the experience in his journal:

> I'm not going to lie. But this was one of the best experiences I've had at university … The first stop was at the Old Mill in South Perth, this made me feel a bit stupid. I must've driven past this thing at least a thousand times, and I just thought it was a pretty cottage sort of thing. Little did I know the importance it held to the story of The Battle of Pinjarra. (Tom, 2014)

Seeing the modest Pinjarra massacre memorial site on the outskirts of the town, the students expressed their shock that the Perth Aboriginal community has been denied a more significant memorial to acknowledge the massacre. The plaque that tells the story of the site is missing (Fig. 3), removed by vandals. While the students participating in the aforementioned native title video seem to have had the most opportunity to understand the cultural connection Aboriginal people have to the land, all service learning students experienced a changing sense of place as a result of the Pinjarra field trip. This has influenced their sense of place in their emerging professional practices (Thomson, et al., in press). Familiar places in Perth now have new stories associated with them. Even the spaces between the stars in the night sky are now more carefully observed after Simon Forrest shared different ways of viewing the night sky on the same field trip.

When asked to comment on the highlights of their service learning experience one student quoted from an interview she had conducted with Noongar man Dennis Simmons.

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> It's all about following that energy. That energy, let's just call it mother nature, that energy is what recharges us as people, it recharges our spirit. So when you go out into the bush and you are sitting there and you think, oh my God, this feels great here, I love this—that's because you're being recharged. Mother Nature is like a battery system then once you recharge you are able to go back into society. So this is what we do with that whole walkabout and going back into bush, it recharges our spirit.

For Perth people, Aboriginal and Wadjella (non-Aboriginal person), 'going back into bush' takes only a short drive from the suburbs. The bush to which Simmons refers is not a remote place but a familiar aspect of life for most Perth inhabitants.

Fig. 2 Simon Forrest points out the route taken by James Stirling as his party crossed the Swan River in 1834 (2013 field trip)

Fig. 3 Students listening to a song about the Pinjarra Massacre at the memorial site, where the plaque is missing (2014 field trip)

5 A Community Media Intervention

A service-learning program such as ours is what academic Tanja Dreher (2010) calls a "community media intervention", an activity or project "developed by people working with communities subjected to media racism in order to alter or speak back to mainstream news media" (p. 594).

We spent time in the classroom at the start of semester discussing the media and how they contribute to racist attitudes in the wider community. The mainstream media frequently reflect a new kind of racism that is more about exclusion and misrepresentation than the blatant and more obvious racism of the past. Students learn how they, as media professionals, can contribute to social change when they first understand how and why Aboriginal people are distrustful of the media.

Dennis Simmons, a Noongar cultural advisor and filmmaker, was invited into our classroom. He told a story to the students about bringing up his sons in Perth and teaching them how to behave so that police or security guards will not target them. He also told a story about his son who, successful in auditioning for a film role in Europe, saw that an article about his success appeared at the back of the *The West Australian*—or *The Worst Australian*, as Simmons calls it. Excited and pleased that he had featured in the newspaper, his son asked why the article was not on the front page. Simmons explained to his son that he would have to steal a car to get on the front page of the paper (personal communication, 2014). He laughs as he tells the story, but it serves to illustrate serious concerns about the persistent negativity of the media, and how they contribute to the wider community's perceptions of Aboriginal people.

Steve Mickler (1998, p. 212) makes a strong case for the media's role in shaping the "quite monstrous", prejudicial public views towards Aboriginal people, a case that had been made previously by two high level government inquiries in 1991: *The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (RCIADIC) and the *Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into Racist Violence.* The RCIADIC made 339 recommendations, several of which were directed at the media, including recommendation number 207:

> That institutions providing journalism courses be requested to: Ensure that courses contain a significant component relating to Aboriginal affairs, thereby reflecting the social context in which journalists work. (Hartley & McKee, 1996, p. 213)

As our students are Journalism and Screen Arts students, this recommendation was of particular relevance when we considered a location for their service-learning experience. A service-learning program for media students was a way of, not only acting on the RCIADIC recommendations, but also recognizing our students as tomorrow's media professionals with the potential to change the way Aboriginal people are represented by the media. While it is likely that some of our students will find their first jobs in regional Australia, most of them will be working in a metropolitan centre like Perth. The relationships they form during their service learning experience, and the development of their knowledge and understanding of an urban Aboriginal community, will assist them to be the type of culturally competent media professionals that can help to change the representation of Aboriginal people by the media. It is this potential for change that defines our service-learning program as a community media intervention.

In addition, the media projects that the students produced with their community

partners were themselves community media interventions. For example, one group of students produced a video with Noongar community radio that explained the station's role in contributing to the process of reconciliation, maintaining culture and building community. Several online feature stories were also written and posted with the type of positive and inspirational content that is rarely found in mainstream media. One story was a profile of an Aboriginal woman running her own successful business, another was about the establishment of a community garden and anotherwas about a youth-focused reconciliation group.[2] Each of these projects provides an alternative viewpoint that speaks back to the negative and stereotypical representa- tion that dominates mainstream media, particularly news media. Community media interventions such as these can help tip the balance of the scales that measure media representation, from the negative and racist, back in favor of the positive.

One journalism student, on completion of the service-learning program, was commissioned to write a story for the online tertiary student website *Hijacked*. His story about a Noongar community Karaoke group—his first as a professional journalist—is another example of a community media intervention, which speaks back to the mainstream media by telling a positive and personal Noongar story that acknowledges Noongar culture, kinship and social justice.

6 Practicalities and Limitations

There were, of course, some obvious practicalities that helped us to choose an urban service learning experience.

The cost of transporting and accommodating a group of 10–15 students and staff in a remote or regional location limited our options. While an immersion experience in a remote community is still a possibility, the cost of such a program would require significantly more funding from both the university and students themselves. Questions arose about how time spent in a remote community would be restricted due to accommodation costs, whether this would inhibit some students from participating because of that cost, and whether it was feasible to run such a program long term. Bearing in mind the need to avoid being 'seagulls', it was important to ensure that a visit to a remote community could be established as a long-term partnership and not just a 'fly-in, fly-out' cultural safari.

Opting for an urban service-learning experience meant that our costs were minimal. The three most significant items in our budget were the Pinjarra field trip, payment for Aboriginal people to conduct cultural awareness workshops, and the hosting of an end of semester showcase. The showcase was an opportunity to celebrate the students' work and the work being done by our community partners. Students, staff and community partners were invited to an evening where we served drinks and snacks and presented the finished projects to all participants. The sharing of the work and what we learned from the program is, in itself, a valuable learning experience. The service-learning program is a form of participatory action research and so our research findings are shared with community, with colleagues and with each other (see chapter "Finding Common Ground: Combining Participatory Action Research and Critical Service Learning to Guide and Manage Projects with Aboriginal Communities" in this volume).

[2] Please see InkWire http://inkwirenews.com.au/category/aboriginal-affairs/

[3] Please see http://hijacked.com.au/noongar-karaoke-noongaroke

A final point about practicalities is that of time, of which we had very little. Time is a scarce commodity for both staff and students. Students in particular have commitments with part-time jobs and other units of study. When could we find 10–14 days to leave Perth and our other commitments? Again, this was not an impossible option but was potentially too difficult for many students and staff with teaching and other commitments that may exclude them from participating. Instead, working from Perth, we directed students to spend at least 3 or 4 h each week with their community partners, a commitment of time that has been manageable for both students and partners.

The 2013 pilot program required us to explain the idea of service learning to our community partners, and to ask them to imagine how they could collaborate with our media students. For some partners this was easy. For example, the Langford Aboriginal Association needed to make a DVD as a condition of its funding for a community health program. There was an obvious project for the students to work on and it was clear how this would be a capacity building activity for the community partner. For others, such as Noongar Radio, it was not so easy to imagine a capacity-building project and the students spent more time talking with the station manager before the idea emerged for a corporate style video that would explain the role of Noongar Radio in the wider community and its contribution to the process of reconciliation.

The community partners with whom we collaborated in 2013 were eager to participate again in 2014. When we returned to those same community partners the following year the process of imagining a project was much easier and the partners already had an understanding of how the collaboration would work. Only 1 year later, there was already evidence that plans to build long-term relationships with our community partners would be important for the success of the service learning program. Examples of projects from the previous year were also used in discussions with new community partners looking to participate for the first time. Furthermore, we were able to maintain communication and contact with partners outside the semester program and this too provided opportunities for strengthening and growing the relationship.

The professional skills that the students sought to practise and develop as they participated in the service-learning program were also an important factor as we planned and worked through the program. The mixed cohort of second and final year Journalism and Screen Arts students was required to demonstrate an appropriate level of competence and professionalism in the work submitted for the project. Students not only had to deliver a professional product to their community partners, but also to their university lecturers for assessment. There is no doubt that all participating students benefited and learned from the cross-cultural collaboration that was central to this program. However, not all students met the standard for the professional skills they were expected to demonstrate in their assessments.

Reciprocity is central to Aboriginal cultures and communities and so the delivery of some kind of capacity building product to community partners is key to the success of a service-learning program. It was, therefore, concerning for us when in 2014 three of the student projects were not successful in terms of the quality of the

work. One was a video that was not of a high enough standard to be useful to the community partner and the others were two journalism stories that did not meet publication standards.

There is always the possibility that students will produce unsatisfactory work for their community partners and it is in those instances that a strong and long-term relationship with community is most important. Time and opportunity for an ongoing dialogue with community partners about this sort of problem will contribute to the long-term success of the relationship. Fortunately students delivered quality media projects to community partners in the pilot program and we believe the relationship with our community partners is now strong enough that they will not be discouraged by a failed project in 2014; they will be back to participate next year. On a more positive note, reciprocity was evident not only in the majority of media projects that were delivered successfully, but also when Noongar Radio acquired a new and enthusiastic volunteer from the 2014 student cohort as one of our service-learning students accepted an offer to participate in a weekly radio show.

7 Conclusions

Some students, while enjoying their service learning experience in Perth, expressed disappointment at not having a more immersive experience in a regional or remote location. Such an experience would be very different to an urban one and it was the idea of "getting to know a different group of people" that made an immersion experience attractive. It would allow students to 'live' with a community for a period of time, rather than just visiting community partners for a few hours each week (Adrian, 2013). Students also expressed doubt that they would be able to find a way to spend time in a remote Aboriginal community outside of the university. If they didn't have an immersion experience at university, then when would they?

Ideally, we would offer both opportunities to our students, urban and remote. Each experience, each community, offers something unique. However, regardless of location, spending time with Aboriginal partners in any community is an investment in the future for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. It is providing the opportunity for students to have a cross-cultural service learning experience that is important. Service learning ensures that our university graduates take cultural awareness, sensitivity and empathy into their professional lives and therefore contribute not only to reconciliation but also to better communities—whether that community is urban or remote, Australian or international, black or white.

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